Ecumenical Theology in the 20th Century: A Faith and Order Cartography

Odair Pedroso Mateus

I invite you to travel one of the long and winding roads of ecumenical theology in the 20th century. In this essay, I use the term "ecumenical theology" in reference to theological work done in the service of multilateral dialogue undertaken by Christian churches to address their past and present divisions with a view to the restoration of full visible unity.

Throughout the 20th century, no other movement or institution embodied with comparable longevity and persistence the service of theology to the search for Christian unity as the 1910 movement on F&O and its successor after 1948, the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order. This essay offers a narrative that maps almost 100 years of F&O work as one way of proposing an introduction to modern ecumenical theology[1].

This attempt at signposting the territory of F&O ecumenical theology is presented in four chronological periods that are not to be seen simply as successive stages of F&O work, but rather as layers bearing marks of their time that progressively juxtapose and increasingly interact with each other, making the task of ecumenical

[1] Most F&O texts quoted in this essay can be freely accessed at the "F&O Papers Digital Edition".

theology far more complex at the end of the 20th century than at its beginning. The four periods or layers are I. “Ecumenical Theology and the Unity of the Churches in the Age of Colonialism”; II. “From Unity in Christ to the Unity of the Churches”; III. “The Renewal of Ecumenical Theology and the Unity of the Churches in times of Emancipation”, and IV. “Ecclesiology and the Unity of the Churches in the Age of World Christianity”. These titles show that this narrative cartography intends to move within the circle constituted by historical context, ecumenical method and ecumenical theological content.

I. Ecumenical Theology and the Unity of the Churches
In the Age of Colonialism

When the movement for a world conference on F&O was launched in the North American east coast in 1910, the European colonial system as well as world missions inspired by the great awakenings of the 18th and 19th century had already globalised Christianity as well as the divisions - often followed by the violence of crusades and wars – that marked the history of its long European moment.

Anglican thinking on Christian unity[2] (Avis 2021 264-299) had prepared its theological ground, from the Oxford movement in the 1830s and the ecumenical ecclesiology that the Episcopalian William Reed Huntington developed with a view to establishing a national catholic church in the United States, to the very influential high Church ecclesiology of the English Charles Gore[3]. Those

[2] P. Avis, “The Origins of Anglican Ecumenical Theology, the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, and the Question of Anglican Orders”, in *A History of the Desire for Christian Unity,* ed. A. Melloni and L. Ferracci, (Leiden: Brill, 2021, vol. I), 264-299.

[3] A.M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple: The Development of Anglican Theology between Lux Mundi and the Second*

were also the days of internationalism: the awareness of being one humanity inspired both in Europe and in the USA greater resistance to war and the promotion of greater cooperation across national borders and cultures as a progressive move towards world peace[4].

Under the initiative of Charles Brent, the movement on F&O was launched by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States late in 1910 through the following resolution: "that all Christian communions throughout the world which confess our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour should be asked to unite with Protestant Episcopal Church in arranging for and conducting a conference based on a clear statement and full consideration of those things in which we differ, as well as those things in which we are one"[5]. Thus, the vision – the very modern vision - was to move from isolation to global, multilateral theological dialogue whose results would persuade the divided churches to take steps towards the restoration of a unity ultimately expressed in the sharing of the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

Following 10 years of an epic preparation[6] that transformed the small city of Gardiner - "a backwater New England mill town" in Maine, USA - into what John Woolverton later called the "improbable centre of a worldwide movement"[7], the preparatory meeting for the world conference was finally held in Geneva, Switzerland, in August

---

World War 1889-1939 (London, Longmans, 1960).

[4] Thus John F. Woolverton's biography of Robert H. Gardiner, a driving force of the F&O movement in its first 14 years, is titled *Robert H. Gardiner and the Reunification of Worldwide Christianity in the Progressive Era* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005).

[5] F&O, *Joint Commission Appointed to Arrange for a World Conference on Faith and Order* (leaflet, reprinted March 20, 1913, F&O paper 1), 4.

[6] Tissington Tatlow, "The World Conference on Faith and Order", in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1548,* ed. R. Rouse and S. Neill (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993), 403-441.

[7] John F. Woolverton, *Robert H. Gardiner and the Reunification of Worldwide Christianity in the Progressive Era* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2005), 197.

1920[8]. It took place just a couple of days after the publication, by a worldwide Anglican bishops' conference called "Lambeth", of a ground breaking "Appeal to Christian Unity"[9]. The appeal invited to the visible unity of the churches based on four principles known as "Lambeth Quadrilateral": Scriptures; the ancient creeds; the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; and a form of episcopal ministry adapted to its context.

The theological programme of the preparatory meeting had three sections: the first was "The Various Conceptions of the Church and the Nature of the United Church", in which participants presented their church traditions and their vision of Christian unity. Moving from the churches' isolation to their encounter and dialogue required comparative ecclesiology. The second and third sections focused on two themes, which were dear to the many Anglicans, mostly high church Anglicans, just arrived from the 1920 Lambeth Conference. They were "The Meaning of the Church and What We mean by Unity" and "The Place of the Bible and a Creed in Relation to Reunion". Questionnaires on faith and creedal faith; ministry; the nature of the church and its unity, and sacraments were then submitted to some 70 F&O local groups around the world for response. The synthesis of the responses informed the theological agenda of the first world conference.

The movement on F&O held three world conferences before the winds of emancipation, blowing in the world and in the churches in the 1960s as secularisation and liberation, would push F&O to enlarge – and make less consensual -

---

[8] Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920, F&O paper 33); O. Pedroso Mateus, "Faith and Order 1920: the Life and Times of a World Conference", academia.edu.

[9] Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive (anglicancommunion.org), resolution 9, accessed April 27, 2022.

the scope of its vision of unity and, consequently, of its theological programme.

The first two world conferences were held before World War II, one in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927[10] and the second in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1937[11]. Each gathered some 400 delegates from more than 100 communions in all continents. Their theological programme reflected the dominant Euro-North American, Anglican-Reformation profile of the churches engaged in the movement, which included an important minority of Old Catholic, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox representatives. In the spirit of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, Anglicans were happy to keep the focus on ancient creeds; the Church; and ministry and sacraments; whereas, in the spirit of the *satis est* of the Augsburg Confession's article 7, Reformation theologians insisted on agreement on the proclamation of the gospel, as in the first conference, or on the doctrine of grace, as in the second.

Which were the main ecumenical theological frontiers opened by the 1920 preparatory meeting and the first two world conferences?

The first was to describe the core of the ecumenical utopia as "visible unity". Our vision, Bishop Charles Brent noted at the opening session of the 1920 preparatory meeting, "is that of an outward and evident unity of the Church of God"[12]. It would not be achieved by simply federating the separated churches; by satisfaction with partial unities; or by one church absorbing the others. We are endeavouring "to bring into the common treasury of a Catholic Church the experience and knowledge which each has

---

[10] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927).
[11] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938).
[12] Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920), 17.

gathered locally and in isolation"[13]. The goal of God's placing, Brent wrote one day after the end of the Geneva meeting, is that of "a Church, on earth, among men, visibly and organically one"[14].

The second world conference noted that the unity we seek has two aspects: "(a) the inner spiritual unity known in its completeness to God alone; and (b) the outward unity which expresses itself in mutual recognition, co-operative action and corporate or institutional unity."[15] That conference tried to unpack this vision by describing three "conceptions of church unity" – cooperative action; intercommunion; and corporate union – and by indicating the elements of unity that each of them required: agreement on faith or confession; on non-sacramental worship; on sacramental faith and practice; on order; or on church polity[16]. The 1937 report included a short section, proposed by the F&O North-American Section, on what would later be called "non-theological factors" of disunity. They were of three categories: sociological or political; historical; or cultural. Churches are kept apart, notes the report, by "barriers of nationality, race, class, general culture, and, more particularly, by slothful self-content and self-sufficiency"[17].

The second frontier may often have gone unnoticed. The two world conferences gave clear evidence and legitimacy to the foundational ecumenical experience, awareness and conviction of a fundamental unity in Christ at the underground of existing ecclesial division.

---

[13] Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920), 20.
[14] Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920), 90.
[15] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 259.
[16] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 250-257.
[17] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 258-259.

Although divided by dogmatic differences, wrote the Orthodox delegates in 1927, “we are one with our brethren here in faith in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”[18]. The second world conference concluded with an “affirmation of union in allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ” in which the delegates stated that, “this allegiance takes precedence of any other allegiance that may make claims upon us”[19].

The third frontier was the doctrine of the church or ecclesiology. On the way to the first world conference, a synthesis of responses to a question about the nature of the church and its unity became the first F&O text on this subject[20]. Its aim was to transcend two ecclesiological attitudes that generated indifference towards the search for visible unity. The first was the belief that one’s church was the one and only true church; the second consisted in arguing that the true church and its unity are invisible, known to God alone.

The first world conference received a short statement titled “The Nature of the Church”[21]. God constitutes the Church as witness to the gospel of salvation. The church, as the communion of believers, is the people of the new covenant, the body of Christ, and the temple of God. The church is Christ’s instrument of reconciliation through the Holy Spirit. There is and can be but one church, holy, catholic and apostolic.

However, there was disagreement on “the extent and manner in which the Church… finds

---

[18] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 385.
[19] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 275.
[20] F&O, *Statements by the Subjects Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order* (Boston, USA, Secretariat, 1927), 9-14.
[21] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 463-466.

expression in the existing Churches"[22]. For some the invisible church is wholly in heaven; for others it included believers on earth. Some contend that the visible expression of the Church was determined by Christ, whereas others argue that the Church "may express itself in varying forms"[23]. Some hold that one of the existing churches is the only true church, others hold that the only true church in some or all of the existing communions. For some, a particular form of ministry "has been shown to be necessary to the best welfare of the church" while for others "no one form of organisation is inherently preferable"[24].

In light of the churches' responses[25] to this and the other six reports received by the first world conference, the F&O Continuation Committee had decided in 1930 that the theme of the second world conference would be "The Church in the Purpose of God"[26]. While the second conference did not implement this decision, two of its five sections' reports confirmed its accuracy. According to "The Church of Christ and the Word of God", "different churches differ in their use of the term 'church'"[27]. Some hold that "the invisible church and the visible church are inseparably connected though their limits are not exactly coterminous", while for others the use of the term with reference to the invisible company of saints

---

[22] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 465.
[23] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 465.
[24] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 465.
[25] L. Hodgson, ed., *Convictions: A Selection from the Responses of the Churches to the report of the World Conference on Faith and Order held at Lausanne in 1927* (London, SCM, 1934).
[26] F&O, *Records of the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order* (Boston, USA: Secretariat, 1930, F&O paper 63), 16, 20.
[27] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 232.

is “misleading and unscriptural”[28]. The report on “The Church’s Unity in Life and Worship” confirmed this insight: “We are led to the conclusion that behind all particular statements of the problem of corporate union lie very divergent conceptions of the Church”[29].

As a result, a main study on comparative ecclesiology, undertaken separately by the North American and the European sections of F&O was launched in 1938, and two other complementary studies, on worship and on intercommunion, were launched the following year.

What can be said about the participation of Orthodox theologians in those three conferences? At the 1920 preparatory meeting, the young theologian Hamilcar Alivisatos offered an introduction to Orthodoxy. The Greek Orthodox local Churches “make together the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Orthodox Church” (33). Its doctrines come from “the fountains of Holy Scripture and apostolic tradition”, developed and explained “by the great Fathers and Doctors of the Church in the Ecumenical Councils” (33). Its order “is based on the democratic principles of the Church at the time of the Apostles” (33). Its liturgy is that of St John Chrysostom and St Basilius. History knows “what this Church has done to spread the Christian faith and its struggles against Mohammedanism” (34). The innovations caused separation with the Western Church. “To reach union, we must be willing to know and help each other and we therefore propose a League of Churches till the World Conference reaches its complete result”[30] (34). Archimandrite Chrysostome Papadopoulos noted, in relation to the debates between Anglicans and Protestants on ecclesiology and the authority of the ancient creeds, that those themes would have

---

[28] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 232.
[29] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 257-258.
[30] Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920, F&O paper 33), 62-64.

been better understood “if more attention were paid to the historic bases of Christianity”[31].

The Eastern Orthodox delegates to the first world conference rejected its theological results as a possible basis for the future reunion of the churches. The exception was the Section II report “The Church’s Message to the World – the Gospel”. The reports conveying agreements on the other subjects, they contended, were in fact verbal agreements that hid real disagreements. They were the result of compromise between “conflicting ideas and meanings” that led to external agreements “on the letter alone”. However, in matters of faith and conscience, “there is no room for compromise”. Two different meanings, they went on to argue, “cannot be covered by, and two different concepts cannot be deduced from, the same word of a generally agreed statement”. In the absence of “the totality of faith… there can be no *communio in sacris”*. Reunion can take place “only on the basis of the common faith and confession of the ancient, undivided Church of the seven Oecumenical Councils and of the first eight centuries”[32].

II. From Unity in Christ to the Unity of the Churches

When the results of the studies on the nature of the Church, ways of worship and intercommunion were presented to the third world conference on F&O, held in Lund, Sweden, in 1952, the movement for a world conference on F&O no longer existed as such and its Anglo-Reformation agenda was outweighed by its new challenges. The movement had been replaced by a permanent think-tank of theologians increasingly sensitive to the need for doing ecumenical theology for divided churches facing modernity. The world had gone through a new world war; the foundations of

---

[31] Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920, F&O paper 33), 62.
[32] H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 382-386.

the colonial system were shaking; the ecclesial landscape had changed, and the ecumenical movement had reached a new stage that raised new challenges to F&O.

The first challenge was the establishment of a World Council of Churches. The churches that had engaged in the search for common mission through the International Missionary Council; in common witness through the Life and Work Movement; and in the search for overcoming inherited doctrinal divisions through the Faith and Order movement, had begun to bring those efforts under the same improbable roof, namely the World Council of Churches. With the establishment of the WCC, the experience, awareness and affirmation of unity in Christ mentioned in the first section of this essay took the unprecedented form of a covenantal relationship among the churches[33]. This covenant relationship expressed itself in the 1938 theological basis of the future WCC – "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour"[34] – and gained a certain ecclesiological density in the 1950 World Council of Churches' statement on its self-understanding, whereby the covenanting churches, without abdicating their respective understandings of the Church and its visible unity, stated that the membership of the Church of Christ was more inclusive than their respective membership and recognised in each other (at least) *vestigia ecclesiae* or elements of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church[35]. Their covenanting expressed, in the words of a Faith and Order report to the WCC Central Committee, "an aspect of the total mystery of the

---

[33] W.A. Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Amsterdam August 22th to September 4th, 1948 (*London: SCM, 1949), 9.
[34] "Constitution for the World Council of Churches", *Documents of the World Council of Churches* (Amsterdam: WCC, 1948), 11-14.
[35] "The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches: The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches", *The Ecumenical Review*, III no. 1 (October 1948): 47-53.

Church”[36]. What did this unprecedented growth towards the manifestation of the *Una Sancta* mean for the ecumenical theological work of F&O?

The second, which seems in contradiction with the first, was the recognition by the covenanting churches gathered by their unity in Christ and by the *vestigia ecclesiae* of a fundamental difference separating them. The report “The Universal Church in God’s Design”, of the World Council of Churches’ 1948 assembly had noted quite straightforwardly, under the influence of Karl Barth and to the great dismay of many in the very Anglican F&O movement, that a “deepest difference” expressed itself in two paradigms of Christian faith called respectively “catholic” and “protestant”[37]. According to the report, “the essence of our situation is that, from each side of the division, we see the Christian faith and life as a self-consistent whole, but our conceptions of the whole are inconsistent with each other”[38]. How to reach authentic theological convergence through a comparative method when the partners in dialogue are stranded from each other by a fundamental difference hidden under the apparent lexical commonalities emerging from the comparison between their different confessional languages?

Prepared for the Lund Conference along the lines of the comparative method the characterised the 1927 and 1937 world conferences, the final report of the study on the nature of the Church[39] reviewed agreements and disagreements on core elements of the nature of the Church; deepened

---

[36] *Minutes and Reports of the Eleventh Meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1958), 116.
[37] W.A. Visser ‘t Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Amsterdam August 22th to September 4th, 1948 (*London: SCM, 1949), 51-57.
[38] W.A. Visser ‘t Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Amsterdam August 22th to September 4th, 1948 (*London: SCM, 1949), 52.
[39] F&O, *The Church: Report of a Theological Commission on Faith and Order* (Rochester, England, 1952, F&O paper series 2, 7).

the understanding of the background of the disagreements; took into account contemporary factors that bear on ecclesiology such as the missionary movements of the 19th century and the churches' conflict with communism; analysed new theological trends and reflected on the theological significance of the newly established World Council of Churches.

The report went on to identify several elements that are common to the different ecclesiologies represented in F&O. The Church is God's gift for the salvation of the world. It was brought into being by the saving acts of God in Christ. It persists in continuity in history by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Her vocation is to worship God and to proclaim the Gospel to every creature. God equips the Church with the various gifts of the Spirit for the building up of the Body of Christ. The Church is composed of forgiven sinners who partake through faith in the eternal life of God's Kingdom[40].

This ecclesiology study was complemented by two other studies, one on worship and the other on Intercommunion, both launched in 1939. The study on ways of worship was equally comparative, with a variety of contributions from different church traditions on the elements of liturgy; on the inner meaning of word and sacraments; and on liturgy and devotion[41]. The study report on *Intercommunion* included four historical studies and 15 essays, from different confessional backgrounds, and among them a surprising contribution from the Dominican Yves Congar – then already well known for his 1937 pioneering contribution to Roman Catholic ecumenical theology *Chrétiens désunis: Principes*

[40] See also R.N. Flew (ed.), *The Nature of the Church: Papers Presented to the Theological Commission Appointed by the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order* (London: SCM, 1952).
[41] P. Edwall, E. Hayman, W. D. Maxwell (eds), *Ways of Worship: The Report of a Theological Commission of Faith and Order* (London: SCM, 1951.

d'un "Oecuménisme catholique" - on the Roman Catholic approach to intercommunion[42].

At its Lund 1952 world conference, the newly established Commission on F&O responded in two ways to the churches' move from isolation to an imperfect fellowship expressed in the establishment of a World Council of Churches and to the recognition of a "fundamental difference" separating them into two systems of Christian faith and life.

Firstly by calling the churches to relate to each other by what became known as the "Lund Principle", that means to "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately"[43]. Secondly, by moving beyond the ecumenical theological method employed since its 1920 preparatory meeting. "This covenant relationship", the head of the F&O Secretariat told participants on the second day of the conference, "brings us to the end of what I would call a *mere comparative ecclesiology*"[44].

"We have seen clearly", notes the conference in its message to the churches "that we can make no real advance towards unity if we only compare our several conceptions of the nature of the Church and the traditions in which they are embodied". We need from now on "to penetrate behind our divisions to a deeper and richer understanding of the mystery of the God-given union of Christ with His Church"[45]. We need increasingly to realise, it concluded, "that the

---

[42] D. Baillie and J. Marsh (eds), *Intercommunion: The Report of the Theological Commission Appointed by the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order together with a Selection from the Material Presented to the Commission* (London: SCM, 1952).
[43] O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 16.
[44] O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 165.
[45] O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 15.

separate histories of our Churches find their full meaning only if seen in the perspective of God's dealing with His *whole* people."[46]. One of the conference reports put it in a procedural language: "On the ground of the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church, and in obedience to him, we seek to penetrate behind the divisions of the Church on earth to our common faith in the one Lord. From the unity of Christ we seek to understand the unity of the Church on earth, and from the unity of Christ and His Body we seek a means of realising that unity in the actual state of our divisions on earth."[47]. This "christological" method, applied to traditional topics of the theology of controversy such as baptism, eucharist and ministry, will lead ecumenical theology in the following decades to some of its most outstanding achievements.

The first expression of the new way of doing ecumenical theology in the service of ecclesial fellowship was "Christ and the Church", the second chapter of the Lund Report[48]. In a single voice, starting from the centre of faith rather than from its denominational or confessional peripheries, theologians representing different ecclesiological traditions noted that "many of our differences arise from a false antithesis between the Church's being in Christ and its mission in the world" and from a failure "to understand the Church in the light of Jesus Christ as God and man, and in the light of His death and resurrection". "Christ, through his Word and Spirit", they go on to state, "calls the Church from the world and sends it into the world". Through this double movement, He builds the Church as "the living Temple of God". The Church

---

[46] O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 15, 156-157.
[47] O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 18.
[48] O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 17-20.

in history, they conclude, “is at once the congregation of sinners and the new creation”.

Four themes dominated the ecumenical theological work accomplished by the North American and European sections of F&O during the years that followed Lund 1952. They were reported to the Montreal 1963 world conference. The first was – once gain - ecclesiology. While the American section proposed a christological ecclesiology of the church and its unity in the world[49], the European section combined more explicitly a christological and a Trinitarian approach to ecclesiology which included a systematic treatment of the church’s attributes, ministry, and mission[50].

The second theme, “Institutionalism”, was again ecclesiological, but this time breaking new ground as its ecumenical focus was the church as a human organisation approached in an interdisciplinary way. Under the impact of the report “The Non-Theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union”[51], the Edinburgh 1937 world conference had recognised that there were obstacles to church unity which were not restricted to issues of faith and church order[52]. The “non-theological factors” were the object of a consultation in 1951 in Bossey, with papers and reports published as *Social and Cultural Factors in Church Divisions* in

---

[49] F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Christ and the Church* (Geneva, WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, 38), 7-34. See also P. Minear (ed.), *Faith and Order Findings: The Final Report of the Theological Commissions to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963* (London: 1963).

[50] F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Christ and the Church* (Geneva, WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, 38), 35-62. See also P. Minear (ed.), *Faith and Order Findings: The Final Report of the Theological Commissions to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963* (London: 1963).

[51] F&O, *The Non-Theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union,* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1937, F&O paper series 1, 84).

[52] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 258-259.

preparation for the Lund world conference[53]. Launched in 1955, the study on Institutionalism adopted two lines of investigation: how institutions operate in *koinonia*; and – through case studies - the influence of institutional factors on church union negotiations. The study produced an anthology[54], a progress report *The Old and the New in the Church*[55], and the report *Institutionalism*[56] presented to Montreal 1963.

Tradition and traditions was the third theme. The ancient Western polemic opposing Protestants and Roman Catholics in relation to sources of authority was formulated in terms of a polarisation between the Reformation's "Scripture first, tradition second" and the Roman Catholic post-Tridentine's "Scripture and tradition". In the F&O study "Tradition and Traditions", a third voice intervened at the outset. The 1953 discussions on its launching were based on a short memorandum drafted by the Russian Orthodox Georges Florovsky[57]. "Christianity is essentially a historical religion", he noted, and added that "the *kerygma* is preserved and propagated by a faithful and loyal *paradosis*". As its title suggests, the study on "Tradition and Traditions"[58] applied the new F&O method and consequently widened the topic in order to transcend this narrow polarisation of the Western divide. One of its results was the ecumenical potential generated by the distinction, proposed

---

[53] C.H. Dodd, G.R. Gragg and J. Ellul, *Social and Cultural Factors in Church Divisions* (London: SCM, 1951).
[54] N. Ehrenstrom and W. Muelder (eds), *Institutionalism and Church Unity: A Symposium Prepared by the Study Commission on Institutionalism, Commission on Faith and Order, World Council of Churches* (New York, Associated Press, 1963.
[55] F&O, *The Old and the New in the Church* (Geneva: WCC, 1961, F&O paper series 2, 34).
[56] F&O, *The Report of the Study Commission on Institutionalism* (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O papers series 2, 37).
[57] *F&O, Working Committee – Minutes of the Meeting held at the Château de Bossey, near Geneva 11th to 19th August 1953* (Geneva: WCC, 1953, F&O papers, series 2, no. 17) 31-33.
[58] F&O, *Report on Tradition and Traditions* (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, no. 40).

by the report of the American Section, between The Tradition; tradition; and traditions.

Ways of Worship was the fourth theme. The work took the form of three enquiries on worship, in Europe, North America, and East Asia, although the East Asian section was never able to convene as such. The European study formulated theses on worship in relation to creation, redemption and new creation, and recommended further study on the discrepancies between worship and modern culture[59]. The North American section focused on the liturgical practices of American churches in light of Scripture and raised questions about the intelligibility of worship language in contemporary culture[60]. The East Asian report reviewed what several conferences, consultations and ad hoc meetings had said recently about worship in Asia, listing positive emphases -such as the variety of worship traditions and the commonalities they shared – and negative emphases, such as the misunderstandings about indigenisation. “There is also laid upon the Church”, the report notes, “responsibility to express its faith and life in terms that can communicate to the world, so that the gospel and Christian life are not seen as foreign but as related to human life in particular cultural situations.”[61] (Fop39 29-45)

III. The Renewal of Ecumenical Theology and the Unity of the Churches in times of Emancipation

Winds of emancipation were blowing on world history, on global Christianity and, as a result, on the ecumenical movement when F&O held its

---

[59] F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Worship* (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, no. 39), 7-25. See also W. Vos (ed.), *Worship and the Acts of God* (Nieuwendam: Studia Liturgica, 1963).
[60] F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Worship* (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, no. 39), 47-62.

[61] F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Worship* (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, no. 39), 29-45.

fourth world conference in Montreal, Canada, in July 1963. The colonial era agonised. The "younger" churches in colonised countries often found it difficult to relate theologically to the critique of colonialism and to liberation struggles in their contexts while their mother churches in colonial countries, hit by growing dechristianisation, found it equally challenging to make theological sense of the emancipation from institutional religion signified by secularisation or the emancipation from white supremacy embodied by the civil rights movement in the United States.

The ecumenical movement was reaching the zenith of its influence and self-confidence through the remarkable growth and influence of the World Council of Churches. The "younger", emancipated churches from Africa, Asia and the Pacific sought membership in the World Council of Churches at the same time as the Orthodox churches of Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and Poland were being admitted. In December 1961, soon after the first WCC assembly in Asia, Visser 't Hooft, the first WCC General Secretary was pictured on the cover of the US Time Magazine as "World Churchman" leading a "Second Reformation".

In the following years, the Roman Catholic Church, which had said "no" to the F&O movement in 1914 and in 1927[62], would hold its second Vatican Council with Christian unity very high on its agenda. Vatican II greeted the 1961 theological basis of the WCC in its decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio[63];* and, in the same decree, it built on the imperfect communion of the WCC 1950 Toronto Statement's reference

[62] M. Levant, "The Positioning of the Catholic Church in the Interwar Period: The Encyclical *Mortalium Animus*", in *A History of the Desire for Christian Unity,* ed. A. Melloni and L. Ferracci, (Leiden: Brill, 2021, vol. I), 703-721.
[63] Council Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio,* para 1, 20, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

to the *vestigia ecclesiae*[64]. It revised in 1963 the Tridentine ambivalent language about one or two sources (*duplex fons)* of revelation[65] in convergence with the Section II report of the 1963 Montreal conference "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions"[66] (Montreal §39, 45, 50). It described itself as the Church of Christ, in the 1965 constitution *Lumen gentium*, in terms of *subsistit in* rather than the polemic and Post-Tridentine *"est",* a move that would ground ecclesiologically the flourishing of ecumenical bilateral dialogues in the following decades[67]. The Roman Catholic Church was represented at Montreal 1963 and joined the Commission on Faith and Order in 1968.

The 1963 world conference produced what its Chairperson, Oliver Tomkins, quoting a delegate, described as "a most promising chaos"[68]. It was far more culturally diverse than previous conferences, with 86 participants out of 489 coming from outside Europe and North America. It was more ecclesially diverse with the very active participation of Orthodox theologians – who no longer waited until the end of the conference to complain about its results - and the presence for the first time of Roman Catholic observers and speakers. It saw lively debates on

---

[64] Council Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio,* para 3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

[65] Council Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum,* para 7, 8, 10. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

[66] P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 50-61, para 39, 45, 50.

[67] Council Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium,* 8. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

[68] D.M. Paton, "A Montreal Diary", in P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 7.

fundamental issues such as the unity of the Church in the New Testament. The German Protestant Ernst Käsemann launched a blow on Lund's christological method by contending, "the historian simply cannot speak of an unbroken unity of New Testament ecclesiology" (what would then be the point of returning to the sources?) whereas his American Roman Catholic counterpart Raymond Brown argued that there is a "unity of belief present in all stages of New Testament thought about the Church"[69]. The contemporary relevance of F&O ecumenical theology was questioned. The American Episcopalian William Stringfellow could not be more straightforward: "Modern thinking and unthinking man does not care a hoot about the F&O Movement because F&O apparently does not care about him"[70]. In a vivid exchange about the Eucharist, a Roman Catholic and a Presbyterian agreed on the following formula: "When *you* celebrate the Eucharist, our Lord is present, and *I* am present with him"[71].

The conference worked in five sections: I. The Church in the Purpose of God; II. Scripture, Tradition and Traditions; III. The Redemptive Work of Christ and the Ministry of his Church; IV. Worship and the Oneness of Christ's Church; and V. "All in Each Place": The Process of Growing Together. It pursued – indeed radicalised - the post-Lund 1952 trend to widen the focus of ecumenical theology beyond the limits of the ecumenical agenda shaped by the requirements for Christian unity of the Anglican and Reformation churches, which undergirded the first two world conferences.

---

[69] D.M. Paton, "A Montreal Diary", in P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 16-17.

[70] D.M. Paton, "A Montreal Diary", in P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 18.

[71] D.M. Paton, "A Montreal Diary", in P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 20.

Each section identified several themes for further study. The very ecclesiocentric Section I asked the churches: “How can a Church which tolerates the barriers which separate men today, whether east and west or black and white, face its Lord who has broken down the wall of partition?”[72] It called for further study on the way the Lordship of Christ over the world is described; on creation and redemption in the context of secularisation; and on the place of the people of Israel in God’s design in the Old Covenant and the New. Section II, pursuing the work of the preparatory studies fell short of overcoming the polarisation Scripture versus Tradition formulated by the theology of controversy by speaking of *sola traditione*: “Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit”[73]. According to Section II, the reconciliation of the diversity of separated traditions within the Tradition required the ecumenical study of church history, “in an attempt to gain a new view of crucial epochs and events in church history, especially those in which discontinuity is evident.”[74].

The verdict that Montreal 1963 had been “a most promising chaos” kept its promises. Between the Aarhus 1964 and the Bangalore 1978 and Lima 1982 commission meetings, the ecumenical theological programme of F&O was considerably different from the theological agenda of its first three world conferences. If churches’ ancient divisions had become confessional cultures, which were now increasingly divided among themselves and within themselves by a wide

---

[72] P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 44, para 16.
[73] P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 52, para 45.
[74] P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 55, para 60.

range of issues related to human emancipation such as racism or systemic poverty, then ecumenical theology could no longer be the same in scope and method[75].

A study on the importance for the ecumenical movement of conciliar life in the ancient church, launched in 1964, was meant to "help the World Council of Churches towards a better self-understanding"[76]. It was succeeded three years later by an enquiry on the significance of the council of Chalcedon and its reception by the churches, which was one of the contributions of F&O to the launching of the theological dialogue between the Oriental and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Worship in a secular age was the theme of a study concluded and reported in 1971[77]. Studies on the ministry of deacons[78], on deaconesses as a service of women in the world today[79], on marriage and the division among the churches were undertaken. Under the impulse of the WCC 1974 consultation "Sexism in the 1970s"[80], F&O addressed the ordination of women in ecumenical perspective in 1979[81] and co-hosted a study on the community of women and men in the church[82]. A consultation held in

---

[75] Faith and Order, "Commission on Faith and Order" in D.E. Johnson (ed.), *Uppsala to Nairobi 1968-1975*, *Report of the Central Committee to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (New York-London: Friendship Press-SPCK, 1975), 72.
[76] Faith and Order, *New Directions in Faith and Order: Reports – Minutes – Documents* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968, F&O paper, series 2, no. 50), 49.
[77] W. Vos (ed.), *Worship and Secularization* (Bussum: Paul Brand, 1970).
[78] Faith and Order, "The Ministry of Deacons", *World Council Studies,* no. 2 (1965).
[79] Faith and Order, "The Deaconess", *World council Studies,* no. 4 (1966).
[80] World Council of Churches, *Sexism in the 1970s: Discrimination against Women – A Report of a World Council of Churches Consultation - West Berlin 1974* (Geneva: WCC, 1975).
[81] C.F. Parvey (ed.), *Ordination of Women in Ecumenical Perspective* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980).
[82] C. Parvey (ed.), *The Community of Women and Men in the Church – A Report of the World Council of Churches' Conference – Sheffield, England, 1981* (Geneva, WCC, 1983). See also G. Gassmann (ed.), *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993* (Geneva: World Council of

cooperation with the WCC Programme to Combat Racism dealt in 1975 with racism in theology and theology against racism[83].

Four themes addressed by F&O during those years deserve a special reference: secularisation; unity; the common expression of faith; and the outstanding tryptic "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry".

Concerning the first, the 1963 world conference had requested a study on creation and redemption[84]. The study was approved in the following year with a more ecumenical title: "Creation, New Creation and the Unity of the Church". It was then linked with another ongoing study in the World Council of Churches on "The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History". It was revised in its final stage by historians and natural scientists, and finally reported to the Bristol 1967 meeting of the Commission on F&O with the title "God in Nature and History"[85]. Modern people, wrote its authors, have entered into "a new experience and understanding of nature and history": these are no longer static, geocentric, limited entities, but processes – as the theory of evolution suggests – "in an indeterminate space and an almost endless time"[86]. Has the God of the Bible any relation to the modern scientific world-view? Our task is "to discover the relations between the biblical message and modern world-view"[87]. The present secular movement towards the unification of

---

Churches, 1993), 27-28.

[83] Faith and Order, "Racism in Theology – Theology against Racism: Report of a WCC Consultation" (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975).

[84] P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 42-43, para 13-15 and footnotes.

[85] Faith and Order, "God in Nature and History", *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol 1967 - Reports – Minutes – Documents* (Geneva: WCC, 1967) 7-31.

[86] Faith and Order, "God in Nature and History", *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol 1967 - Reports – Minutes – Documents* (Geneva: WCC, 1967), 7.

[87] Faith and Order, "God in Nature and History", *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol 1967 - Reports – Minutes – Documents* (Geneva: WCC, 1967) 9.

humankind and its history through science and technology, the study noted, “lays a heavy pressure on all the Christian churches to seek… the world-wide unity of the Christian Church”; and it concluded: “Only the one Church can be the adequate counterpart of the one world”[88].

Concerning the second theme, unity, the 1937 world conference had dedicated a section to the unity of the church in life and worship. The text described “several conceptions of unity” (what we would call today “models of church union”): co-operative action; Intercommunion; and Corporate Union, and identified the requirements of each of them[89]. Our oneness in Christ and our disunity as churches were the main themes of the F&O contribution to the WCC 1954 assembly. Following a New Testament-based exposition on Christ’s unifying work and the oneness of the church in its earthly pilgrimage, the text shows “how it is that our disunity as churches contradicts our unity in Christ”.[90] The fruits of those initial reflections on the vision of the ecumenical movement were harvested in a concise and positive statement on unity - adopted first by F&O in 1960 then by the WCC New Delhi 1961 assembly – which became “canonical” in ecumenical dialogue and is worth to be quoted in full.

“We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptised in Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a

---

[88] Faith and Order, “God in Nature and History”, *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol 1967 - Reports – Minutes – Documents* (Geneva: WCC, 1967), 25.
[89] L. Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937* (London: SCM, 1938), 250-269.
[90] “Faith and Order: Our Oneness in Christ and Our Disunity as Churches”, in *The Evanston Report* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 82-92.

corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people."[91]

The New Delhi statement offered a vision of Church unity – all in each place united in a fully committed fellowship by apostolic faith, sacramental life, ministry, mission and witness – to which was implicitly associated a model of church union: that of organic union, in other words, that of united, post-denominational churches in different regions or countries. The study on concepts of unity and models of church union, launched in Louvain in 1971[92], added to the local emphasis of New Delhi a universal or catholic dimension by introducing in the vision of unity the notion of conciliar fellowship. Regional or national united churches are in communion with each and express it through a conciliar way of living together at the universal level. According to a consultation held in Salamanca in 1973, "the one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united"[93]. This expanded description of the ecumenical vision initially formulated in New Delhi was adopted by the Nairobi WCC assembly in 1975[94].

---

[91] "Reports of Sections: Unity", in W.A. Visser 't Hooft (ed.), *The New Delhi Report* (London: SCM, 116-134).
[92] Faith and Order. *Louvain 1971 – Study Reports and Documents* (Geneva: WCC, 1971, F&O papers, series 2, no. 59), 240-241.
[93] Faith and Order, "The Unity of the Church: The Goal and the Way", in *Uniting in Hope: Reports and Documents from the Meeting of the Faith and Order Commission*, (Geneva: WCC, 1975, F&O paper, series 2, 72), 113-114.
[94] "What Unity Requires", in D.M. Paton, *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975 – The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November.10 December, 1975* (London-Grand Rapids, SPCK-Eerdmans, 1976) 59-69.

It was the beginning of a sustained debate[95], throughout the 1970s, centred on the expression "truly united" understood as a synonym for post-confessional or post-denominational, and nurtured by the remarkable growth of ecumenical bilateral dialogues involving world confessional bodies[96]. Led by the Lutheran World Federation, the world confessional bodies rejected in 1974 the idea that only united or post-confessional churches could live in a universal conciliar fellowship[97]. The unity of all in each place with all in all places and ages in conciliar fellowship was in their view fully compatible with a reconciled diversity in which ecclesial identities such as Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed or Orthodox, purified from their divisiveness through the ecclesial reception of the results of multilateral and bilateral ecumenical dialogues, would exchange their unique gifts and grow together in communion locally and universally.

This polemic on the relationship between the goal of unity and the way to unity was also the horizon of a second debate, which was more explicitly related to the task of ecumenical theology in the age of emancipation. In response to the WCC 1968 Uppsala assembly – which greeted emancipation by choosing as its theme "Behold, I make all things new" and by speaking of the church as "the sign of the coming unity of mankind" - F&O launched in 1971 - following sustained discussions on the struggle for justice in society, the encounter with living faiths, the struggle against racism, the handicapped in society, and cultural diversity - a study on the need to hold theologically together the search for "the unity of the church and unity of mankind"[98]. The study saw the polarisation between the vision

[95] H. Meyer**,** *That All May be One – Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 102-126.
[96] Reports of international bilateral dialogues are published in the series *Growth in Agreement*. See also N. Ehrenstrom and G. Gassmann, *Confessions in Dialogue: A Survey of Bilateral Conversations among World Confessional Families 1959-1974* (Geneva, WCC, 1975, F&O paper, series 2, no. 74).
[97] G. Gassmann and H. Meyer, *The Unity of the Church: Requirements and Structures* (Geneva, LWF, 1983).

of unity represented by Orthodoxy through the F&O Moderator John Meyendorff and the vision of unity from the conflicting perspective of liberation theologies, represented by the Argentinian Methodist and F&O commissioner José Míguez Bonino[99]. The title of a 1974 summary of this study was eloquent: "Towards Unity in Tension" We believe, the authors wrote, that "the unity of mankind for which we pray and hope, and the just interdependence of free people inseparable from it, cannot be thought of apart from God's liberating activity and an active human response and participation.[100]"

Launched in 1971, the study on the common expression of the faith, also known as "Giving Account of the Hope that is in Us", was based on three convictions with methodological implications for ecumenical theology: ("1) churches and Christians have the obligation in every new age to confess afresh, in the language of that age, their faith in Christ; (2) they must strive for expressions of the Christian faith within different cultural worlds and in diversified social, political and religious situations; (3) the divided churches might rediscover their unity by letting themselves be reconstituted by the truth of the Gospel"[101].

The unusual result of this empirical, inductive study on what one could call "the lived faith of

---

[98] G. Müller-Fahrenholz (ed.), *Unity in Today's World: The Faith and Order Studies on 'Unity of the Church – Unity of Humankind'*, (Geneva: WCC, 1978, F&O paper, series 2, no. 88).

[99] O. Pedroso Mateus, "José Míguez Bonino and the Struggle for Global Christianity in the 1970s", in K. Kunter and A. Schilling (eds), *Globalisierung der Krchen: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritte Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen: V&R, 2014).

[100] Faith and Order, "Towards Unity in Tension", *Uniting in Hope: Reports and Documents from the Meeting of the Faith and Order Commission*, (Geneva: WCC, 1975, F&O paper, series 2, 72), 90-94.

[101] Faith and Order, "Giving Account of the Hope that is Within Us – Report of the Conference", *Uniting in Hope: Reports and Documents from the Meeting of the Faith and Order Commission*, (Geneva: WCC, 1975, F&O paper, series 2, 72), 25.

the churches today", closed in Bangalore in 1978, was a collection of affirmations, poems, confessions, prayers often gathered according to their regional origins in four volumes[102]. In the preface of the first volume, the Taiwanese theologian C.S. Song raised the following question: "Would it be too ambitious to hope that statements and expressions of faith made in confessing situations collected in this and succeeding volumes may help redirect the ecumenical search for unity to its 'logical' and thus 'primary' place, that is, confessions that Christians today are making in various parts of the world at the risk of their safety and their lives?"[103] Future F&O work on the theme will answer to this question with a "Yes".

What I called above the landmark tryptic "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry", known as BEM, came into existence in Lima in 1982 less as a planned study and far more as an insight, that is, to harvest the fruits of half a century of F&O ecumenical tradition in three key areas of its theological work. BEM became, in the words of Günther Gassmann, "the most widely published, translated, discussed and commented text in the history of the ecumenical movement"[104]. It was destined to rekindle hope in the churches growth towards visible unity.

The fruits of the early comparative method applied to the three themes; the application to them of the so called christological method after Lund 1952; and the concern to hold together convergence on those three divisive issues and their ethical implications for today's common witness, in response to the call for ecumenical ecclesiology "in and for the world", were

---

[102] Faith and Order, *Confessing our Faith around the World* (Geneva: WCC, vol. I, F&O paper 104, 1980; vol. II, F&O paper 120, 1983; vol. III, F&O paper 123, 1984; vol. IV, F&O paper 126, 1985).
[103] Faith and Order, *Confessing our Faith around the World* (Geneva: WCC, 1980, F&O paper 104), 7.
[104] G. Gassmann (ed.), *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993), 25.

harvested in a text that carries the ecumenical authority of a convergence achieved by theologians officially representing churches from the Reformation, Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions in F&O as well as in official bilateral dialogues.

As he introduced *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*[105] to the 1982 Lima Commission meeting, the Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright noted that it was "a good fortune" that BEM was written in a time in which ecumenical theologians were able to shed new reconciling light on ancient controversies by tacking stock of recent developments of biblical, liturgical and sacramental scholarship[106], which made manifest surprising commonalities around baptism of children or baptism of those who can confess the faith; the eucharist as sacrifice or the eucharist as ordinance; ministry in the apostolic succession and ministry in the apostolic tradition.

The ecclesiological conviction underlying the composition of BEM – in the words of the Reformed and Roman Catholic Brother Max Thurian from the Taizé Community, one of its senior drafters - is that when the churches, through their representatives, are gathered together by the WCC, they are no less churches than when making their decisions individually". This ecumenical tradition, he concluded, "is the fruit of a common 'reading' by the various churches of holy scripture and of the great Tradition interpreting God's word, with a view to re-discovering the visible unity willed by Christ."[107] (BEM, DEM 92) Designed "for the conversion of the churches", BEM did not convince any of them to reconsider their self-understanding for the sake of visible unity.

---

[105] Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982, F&O paper 111).
[106] Faith and Order, *Towards Visible Unity: Commission on Faith and Order Lima 1982* (Geneva, WCC, 1982, vol. I, F&O paper 112), 80.
[107] M. Thurian, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry", in N. Lossky and others (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 2002), 92.

IV. Ecclesiology and the Unity of the Churches in the Age of World Christianity

When F&O gathered ecumenical pilgrims in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, for its 1993 sixth world conference, with focus on ecclesiology[108], neoliberalism was spreading economic inequalities around the world; the Soviet Empire and the "cold war" no longer existed; some religions were increasingly playing a cultural and political identity role; ecology, ethnicity and nationalism were important challenges to the unity of humanity and to Christian unity; the ecumenical movement, the future WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser contended, was going through a paradigm shift, which called for new approaches to the search for unity and the generation of new ecumenical space[109]; Christianity's demographic "gravity centre" had moved from Europe to Southern Africa; newly established Independent, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal denominations in the southern hemisphere found it increasingly difficult or more often unnecessary to make theological sense of what looked to a growing number the Eurocentric and colonial ecumenical agenda of the search for the manifestation of the one Church of Christ in Eucharistic fellowship through agreement on apostolic faith, sacramental life, ministry and mission made possible by ecumenical multilateral and bilateral dialogues.

The profile of the ecumenical theological work accomplished by F&O during the last two decades of the 20th century changed considerably when compared with the outlook of the theological programme described in section III of this essay. From a critical and ecumenical reflection on the life and witness of the churches in the world, facing secularisation and liberation and divided

[108] T.F. Best and G. Gassmann (eds), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Geneva, WCC, 1994, F&O paper 166).
[109] K. Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC, 1994).

among themselves and within themselves by those challenges, F&O ecumenical theology moved back to its initial self-understanding of a service to the overcoming of inherited ecclesial division understood primarily, if not exclusively, as theological division. What we need, Wolfhart Pannenberg would say to F&O in a 1989 address about its future work "is a critical examination of the secularism of modern civilization".

Studies such as the outstanding "Ecclesiology and Ethics", which sought to hold together what the church is and what the church does as a moral community[110], and "Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Unity of the Church" were the exception that, in the last two decades of the 20th century, confirmed the rule. "Ecclesiology and Ethics" would arguably bear a very limited influence on future Faith and Order work on ecumenical ecclesiology. This was even more the case with similar WCC study projects on ecclesiology held outside F&O such as "The Church and the Poor", undertaken under the leadership of the Uruguayan liberation theologian Julio de Santa Ana[111].
This move can be discerned through a review of three areas of work corresponding to the period leading to the 1993 Compostela world conference.

The first area was the ecumenical reception of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*[112].

---

[110] T.F. Best and M. Robra, *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC, 1997).
[111] J. de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church* (Geneva: WCC, 1977); J. de Santa Ana (ed.), *Separation without Hope? Essays on the Relation between the Church and the Poor during the Industrial Revolution and the Western Colonial Expansion* (Geneva: WCC, 1978); J. de Santa Ana (ed.), *Towards a Church of the Poor: The Work of an Ecumenical Group on the Church and the Poor* (Geneva: WCC, 1979).
[112] Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982, F&O paper 111).

Commentaries[113] and study guides on BEM[114], favouring its ecumenical reception, were published. More than 180 churches' responses were received, analysed between 1986 and 1988 and published in six volumes[115]. An extensive summary, published in 1990[116], identified three theological themes requiring further work: Scripture and Tradition; sacrament and sacramentality; and ecumenical perspectives on ecclesiology. The three had been addressed by the F&O movement in its first two world conferences.

The second area was the study "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today", proposed in Bangalore 1978, launched formally in Buenos Aires in 1982 and concluded in 1990. Its predecessor in the 1970s, "Giving Account of the Hope that is In Us" attempted at eliciting unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity from expressions of *fides qua creditur*, from faith confessed in action in different contemporary contexts and in challenging situations. The new study attempted at presenting the contemporary meaning and the ecumenical potential of an ancient expression of *fides quae creditur* - the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople (381) - as a judge of the authenticity of contextual expressions of faith. Its main result was *Confessing the One Faith*[117], an

---

[113] M. Thurian (ed.), *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1983, F&O paper no. 116); M. Thurian and G. Wainwright (eds), *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration* (Geneva: WCC, 1983, F&O paper no. 117).

[114] W.H. Lazareth, *Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: A Study Guide* (Geneva: WCC, 1982, F&O paper no. 114).

[115] M. Thurian (ed.), *Churches Respond to BEM – Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" text* (Geneva: WCC, vol. 1, 1986, F&O paper no. 129; vol. II, 1986, F&O paper no. 132; vol. III, 1987, F&O paper no. 135; vol. IV, 1987, F&O paper no. 137; vol. V, 1988, F&O paper no. 143; vol. VI, 1998, F&O paper no. 144).

[116] Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses* (Geneva: WCC, 1990, F&O paper no. 149).

[117] Faith and Order, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*

explication of the Nicene Creed structured in sections corresponding to the three articles of the Creed. Each section identifies the main theological themes of its corresponding article, presents the relation between the article and its biblical roots and offers perspectives on its contemporary meaning. The Nicene Creed, wrote the authors in the introduction of *Confessing the One Faith*, "serves to indicate whether the faith as set forth in modern situations is the same faith as the one the Church confessed through the centuries"[118]. In reaction, some asked whether God must remain Greek and considered this study a neo-colonial expression of a Eurocentric control of the Christian Tradition.

The third area was the 1993 fifth world conference and its theme. Its aim was to bring before the churches the results of recent F&O work on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the confession of the apostolic faith today and the unity of the church and the renewal of the human community. Launched in 1982 and initially foreseen to be held in 1987 in connection with the 1200th anniversary of Nicea II, the seventh ecumenical council, the conference was postponed to 1989 because of the time F&O needed to complete its ongoing studies and then to 1993 due to the WCC calendar[119]. The postponement was providential for the choice of its theme, inspired by promising results of bilateral dialogues.

Following the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council, bilateral dialogues involving official representatives of two or more churches or Christian World Communions, addressing primarily issues that had traditionally separated them, grew in number and ecumenical

---

(Geneva: 1991, F&O paper 153).

[118] Faith and Order, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* (Geneva: 1991, F&O paper 153), 4.

[119] O. Pedroso Mateus, "Lost and Found on the Road to Compostela: Towards the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order", 2018, academia.edu.

importance. The debate on concepts of unity and models of union, described above, showed the need of coordination and synergy between F&O multilateral work and the blossoming of bilateral dialogues especially during the 1970s. This was done to some extent through the establishment of a Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, which addressed several issues of ecumenical methodology (reports).

In the early 1980s, influential international bilateral dialogues such as the Anglican-Roman Catholic, the Orthodox-Roman Catholic or the Anglican-Orthodox began to explore and realize the ecumenical potential of the understanding of the Church as *koinonia* or communion for their growth in fellowship. This was one of the important impulses that led F&O in 1989[120] to decide that ecumenical ecclesiology would be in the following years not only the overarching focus of its theological work but also one of its main studies, and that - inspired by an address by the Orthodox John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon - the study would focus on the church in the image of the Trinity.

In the same vein, F&O's contribution to the statement on unity adopted by the 1991 WCC assembly made of the polysemic term *koinonia* its focus. "The unity of to which we are called is a koinonia given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship…" This goal is realised, the text goes on to say by pointing to confessional reconciled diversity as a legitimate expression of the understanding of unity, "when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness"[121].

---

[120] T.F. Best, *Faith and Order 1985-1989: The Commission Meeting in Budapest 1989* (Geneva: WCC, 1990, F&O paper no. 148), 202-219.

[121] "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling", M. Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report – Seventh Assembly*, Geneva-Grand Rapids, WCC-Eerdmans,

If *koinonia* informs the WCC statement on unity and will inform its future ecumenical theological work, then why not making it the theme of the 1993 world conference? Meeting in Rome in 1991, F&O decided that its theme would be "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness". Held in Compostela, Spain, the conference worked in four sessions: I. The Understanding of Koinonia and its Implications; II. Confessing the One Faith to God's Glory; III. Sharing a Common Life in Christ; and IV. Called to Common Witness for a Renewed World. According to the report of Section I, "learning from each other about our different ecclesiologies, implicit and explicit, we perceive the need for a substantial study to be undertaken by the F&O Commission on the Nature of the Church and the Unity We Seek in the light of koinonia"[122].

At the end of the ecumenical century, Faith and Order remained in continuity with the move described in the present section. The first results of the study on ecclesiology were published in 1998 as *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*[123]. A study on ecumenical hermeneutics[124], whose aim was "to assist the churches to engage in dialogue across cultures and confessions and to understand the inter-relation between them"[125], had been launched in the aftermath of the 1993 world conference. A third study, on the role of worship in the search for unity, was initiated in 1994. Finally, Faith and Order launched in 1997, in cooperation with the WCC, a study on "Ethnic

---

172-174.

[122] T.F. Best and G. Gassmann (eds), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Geneva: WCC, 1994, F&O paper no. 166), 235.

[123] *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, Geneva, WCC, 1998, F&O paper 181.

[124] *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, Geneva, WCC, 1998, F&O paper 182.

[125] Faith and Order. From Canberra to Harare: Activity Report 1991-1998 – An offprint from the Unity I Hearing Report, 6.

Identity, National Identity and the Unity of the Church"[126].

Conclusion: Ecumenical Dialogue for a post-Eurocentric Christianity

The attempt at achieving convergence on the essentials of a basic understanding of the Church would remain the "major project" of Faith and Order between 1994 the 2020s[127]. The world Council of Churches responded in 1998 to the ecumenical challenge represented by the sustained growth of a post-Eurocentric Christianity, in which division is often perceived as Christian "biodiversity", by moving towards the establishment of a Global Christian Forum in 2007. Faith and Order, however, was not in a position, until 2015, to address the ecumenical implications of what its convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* called emerging churches "which propose a new way of being the Church"[128]. The first results of its work on ecumenical ecclesiology challenged by world Christianity were not published until late 2022[129].

Faith and Order proved to be more reactive in responding to the ecumenical challenges raised by intra-church or inter-church controversies concerning moral issues. The role of the so-called

---

[126] *Faith and Order at Crossroads: Kuala Lumpur 2004 – The Plenary Commission Meeting,* Geneva, WCC, 2005, F&O paper 196, 201-248.

[127] *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Geneva, WCC, 2005, F&O paper 198; *The Church: Towards a Common Vision,* Geneva, WCC, 2013, F&O paper 214; *Churches Respond to The Church: Towards a Common Vision,* Geneva, WCC, 2 volumes, 2021, F&O papers 231, 232; *What are the Churches Saying about the Church,* Geneva, WCC, 2021, F&O paper 236; *Common Threads*, Geneva, WCC, 2021, F&O paper 233; *Global Christianity and the Common Understanding of the Church*, Geneva, WCC, 2022-2023, F&O papers 234, 239.

[128] *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Geneva, WCC, 2013, para 7, F&O paper 214.

[129] *Global Christianity and the Common Understanding of the Church,* Geneva, WCC, 2022-2023, F&O papers 234 and 239.

“non-theological factors” in disunity and unity has been recognised at least since the 1937 world conference although the methodology of ecumenical dialogue seems to underestimate their importance. Since the last decades of the last century, moral issues have emerged prominently as one of them. Following the WCC 1998 assembly, Faith and Order responded to the growing controversial nature of some moral issues by launching first a study on theological anthropology. On that basis, the Commission moved to a descriptive approach to what happens when churches teach on moral issues[130]. At the final stage of the study, Orthodox and Roman Catholics members of Faith and Order surprisingly decided that the working methodology of the text led to “the relativistic approach”[131]. The study was relaunched in 2015 by first showing how different Christian traditions teach on moral issues[132]. This was followed by the analysis of situations in which churches have felt the need to reconsider deep-seated views on certain moral issues such as slavery, polygamy, usury, religious freedom, participation in war, and suicide.[133] It was concluded by making the theological and practical case for an enlightened understanding of the factors that lead to disagreements on moral issues[134].

Multilateral and bilateral dialogues on these and other controversial topics have remained too much indebted to an Enlightenment-centred notion of truth that lacks continuity with the fact that the foundational “truth” of Christianity is narrative – a person –, which means that dogmatic and doctrinal truth-claims are not hermeneutically autonomous in relation to Jesus

---

[130] *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, Geneva, WCC, 2013, F&O paper 215.
[131] *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, Geneva, WCC, 2013, F&O paper 215, 3-4.
[132] *Learning from Traditions*, Geneva, WCC, 2021, F&O paper 228, Churches and Moral Discernment, vol. 1.
[133] *Learning from History,* Geneva, WCC, 2021, F&O paper 229, Churches and Moral Discernment, vol. 2.
[134] *Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia,* Geneva, WCC, 2021, F&O paper 235, Churches and Moral Discernment, vol. 3.

of Nazareth's foundational compassion for the crowds.

In this sense, it is possible to envisage the future of ecumenical multilateral and bilateral dialogues in ways in which textual truth-claims would lose part of their hegemony as the privileged basis of theological convergences preparing the way for ecclesial communion, in favour of a kind of archaeology of hidden communion, that means, in favour of the search for underground or infra-textual *vestigia ecclesiae* or elements of the true church that do not necessarily find their way into texts about normative textualities, but which are no less important as potential bonds of fellowship.

It is also possible to envisage the future of ecumenical multilateral and bilateral dialogues in ways in which textual truth-claims would lose part of their hegemony by accomplishing a movement from the search for symmetric lexical equivalences between two or more confessional languages to the search for semantic equivalences between them so that the absence of symmetric translations between words from confessional languages is not seen as an index of ecclesial estrangement, but it is transcended by the charity-based search for semantic equivalences involving different words from one confessional language that may be at variance with words from another confessional language or languages.